

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.  
1929 - 1968

The Civil Rights Movement was marked by heroism, pain, and suffering, and historic social change. Its successes were achieved by an entire people in motion, tired of oppression, tired of second class citizenship, tired of segregation.

Its leaders were many. They were based primarily in the African American churches but with important contributions from the most advanced sections of the labor movement. Its supreme leader was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Had he lived he would be observing his 73<sup>rd</sup> birthday next Tuesday.

The starting point of the Civil Rights movement is often said to be the refusal of Rosa Parks to yield her seat toward the front of the bus in Montgomery Alabama. When Rosa Parks was arrested the whole black community, 40,000 strong, engaged in what observer called, "perhaps the greatest strike in the history of this country". For more than a year they refuse to patronize the Montgomery bus system until it was integrated

Martin Luther King was the president of the Montgomery Improvement Association led the bus boycott. Other struggles followed - The lunchcounter sit-ins. The Freedom Riders. In the year 1960 alone more than 50,000 people mostly black, some white, participated in demonstrations, and 3,600 were arrested and jailed.

In Birmingham, they faced the police clubs, tear gas, dogs and high-power water cannon of Sheriff Bull Connor. In Philadelphia, Mississippi, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner were arrested, beaten with chains and shot to death.

And then of course on August 28, 1963, there was the magnificent march on Washington. Out of these and many other struggles came the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and The Voting Rights Act of 1965. Historic achievements indeed. But then came a jolt of harsh reality. The Watts uprisings of August 1965.

The successes and advances of the Civil Rights movements were indeed historic - but they benefited primarily a small percentage of middleclass African Americans. As Watts proved, they were only dimly relevant to the impoverished millions in the ghettos of the North.

No one saw this more clearly than Dr. King. His response was to urge a joint struggle by organized labor and the African American people to open a new road for the entire nation – a road that would go beyond the Civil Rights victories toward economic equality.

And so in 1965, he launched the Chicago Freedom Movement, to wage war against poverty, unemployment, and slums in Chicago, the most segregated city in the North. The movement held weekly marches for more than a year without forcing concessions from Mayor Daley's establishment. Dr King found that, in his own words, "it is much harder to eradicate a slum than to integrated a bus."

He found it insufferable that the government could spend \$50 billion a year in Vietnam - yet not find the dollars to address poverty in Watts or in Chicago.

In 1968 he called for a 2-point program: End the war in Vietnam - and reorder national priorities to abolish poverty. Out of this grew the "Poor People's Campaign" which was launched with a march on Washington.

Many who had praised his "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963 assailed him for his Poor People's Campaign in 1968.

It was during the preparations for this campaign, and its march on Washington, that he was urged to come to Memphis to assist the striking sanitation workers.

As we know, on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee, at the age of 39, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

I think the most meaningful tribute we can pay to Dr. King is to resolve to continue, each in our own way, his unfinished Poor People's Campaign. In so doing, we work to turn the dream into reality.

Thank you.

Will Parry  
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